

CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# SPEC

VOL. I

NO. 3

## Rhoda Royal

The season 1940 has seen the passing of two most famous Circus men of the early Century. Most recent of these was the sad death of 'Rhoda Royal' in a Chicago Hospital. Older than Jess Adkins by a score of years, Rhoda had entered show business that much earlier, and was identified as one of the greatest horse trainers of all time. He had once trained an act of 61 horses for Barnum & Bailey, which still draws praise from those who saw it.

This reporter became best acquainted with Royal during his connection with the Tom Mix Circus in 1936-37. On many occasions we sat at the door of his trailer, long after the call "Lights out", as "Rhodie" relived his past experiences for my benefit. During the showing of my photo albums on various lots, arguments sometimes arose as to "who that funny looking person on the end might be", or the name of the show, or the year. However, a quick way of settlement was always to "ask Rhoda" who knew them all, and was a ready and respected authority. He once told another performer that this writer knew "more persons on more lots than anyone out of show business"; which is indeed a compliment.

In addition to being a famous performer, Royal had been a valued Equestrian Director, and at one time controlled his own big R.R. Show, being later associated with most of the big Shows of that day. Because

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## Jess Adkins

Shortly after the last appearance of "Spec", the Show World was shocked to hear of the sudden passing of Jess Adkins, co-owner of Cole Bros Circus and last of the active Old-Time-Circus Executives. Although only slightly past the half century mark, Jess had been connected with the biggest Circuses for 30 years, except for a short enlistment in the U. S. Navy during the first World War. He will probably be remembered most by fans, as the great champion of the Horse Drawn parade when these were generally discontinued.

Mr. Adkins told me only this spring that he had always considered his 1934 parade for Hagenbeck-Wallace, the finest spectacle of recent years, and regretted that it was no longer possible to stage such processions with profitable results for the show.

The writer had been closely acquainted with Jess for the past five years and values greatly the historical information gathered from him during that time. Always early on the lot, he never failed to greet me with a friendly hand clasp and admonition to make myself at home. On several occasions he had requested me to take photos of Mrs. Adkins and the children for his personal Album, and one of my last memories of him is in this connection. Jess and Mrs. Adkins and the two children had lined-up in front of the "Mother Goose" wagon for a family photo, and I had just started to focus my camera when the sky suddenly darkened and a great blast of wind billowed up the Big Top. In a couple of minutes the blow was all over and the sun began to shine again, but at the first gust of wind Jess had excused himself and darted across the back-yard, to station himself at the front door for any emergency. When we met again later that day, Jess put his arm about my shoulder and remarked a bit sadly, "I'm sorry I had to spoil that picture. We haven't had any yet this season, but the customers come first, you know".

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JESS ADKINS  
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That incident was typical of Jess Adkins - whose first thought was of the other fellow, and especially the public, who paid to see his show.

Jess Adkins was quick to see the possibilities of the Circus Historical Society and after reading over the first issue of "Spec", which I had handed to him at the Detroit Shrine Circus, he said, "Tell the boys its a fine idea - a mighty fine idea!" "It should have been started sooner, but don't let it become too sentimental." Two days later, the Rochester quarters were destroyed in one of the show world's most terrible disasters, and Cole Bros parade wagons, which Circus Historians regarded as the last connecting link between the Circus of today and the Big Shows of the past, went up in flames. So passed the American Circus parade, most colorful spectacle of our early memories. And so passes Jess Adkins, certainly the most colorful and best beloved showman of our present day.

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RHODA ROYAL  
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of ill health he did not troupe this season. He is survived by his wife Carrie.

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COLE BROS. AT NORTH PLATTE - 1940  
By Arthur Stensvad, C.H.S.

On July 26th, North Platte, Nebr., was visited by the world's second largest circus. Cole Bros. Circus arrived early in the morning from Kearney, Nebr., and a great crowd gathered to watch the unloading until the last piece of equipment was on the grounds. Despite showers the crowd watched with interest the rising of the cookhouse, Menagerie, Horse tents, side show and big top tents. "Kids" came and worked their way into the big show. Millions seemed to cluster the acres upon which the Cole Bros. tents were erected. As soon as the calliope was spotted, the blaring notes of "Beer Barrel Polka" & "South of The Border" were carried across the field where huskies were raising tents and bosses yelling at the bunch of "kids". At noon the side show opened and the ballyhoo filled the air. Promptly at 1 p.m. the gates opened and North Platte's largest circus greeted the crowds.

Ken Maynard, "World's Champion Cowboy" seemed a little tame for the sand-hillers who make a living breaking wild broncs and roping cattle, but of course, Buffalo Bills' home towners enjoyed Ken's show.

The tents were crowded and both performances were given with no lapse of time. Popular comment was, "BEST SHOW THAT EVER PLAYED THESE PARTS SINCE BUFFALO BILL".

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The articles in memory of Jess Adkins and Rhoda Royal were by Don Smith. The story on John Robinson Circus at Guelph, Ont. contributed by W.W. Tyson. The Holiday issue of SPEC will feature Model Circuses in story & photos.



JOHN ROBINSONS' CIRCUS  
SEASON - 1921  
Guelph, Ont., Canada

Although, John Robinson's Circus title had been well known in the United States for many years it was not until the season of 1921 that the Mugivan-Bowers and Ballard combination routed the Circus into this Province. The coming of the Robinson show was no doubt the result of the initial and very successful post-war visits (1919 and 1920) of the then, well known Sparks Circus.

Quite well does the writer remember one bright sunny morning in May 1921 when the shining white advance car heralded the coming of the new circus title. A real old time car it was too -- with Old John's picture on its side, together with other colorful animal pictures. Guelph was well billed for Wednesday, June 22nd, and among the lithos that remain in my memory was the well known Open Mouthed Hippo - used by almost every circus since the beginning of time!

Show day arrived and the neat, clean appearance of the twenty-nine show train immediately found a warm spot in the hearts of the circus public and horse lovers in particular. The circus this year had been built up to thirty cars -- one ahead, fourteen flats, seven stock and eight coaches.

The year 1921 still was able to boast of circus parades and crowds gathered early for the much heralded "mile long street spectacle".

Among the many parade features that I can recall are the highly carved No. 1 Bandwagon (can any fan name it?), a small den drawn by a four horse grey hitch, with a very, very large polar bear inside; a wonderful old style three section den with small horned animals; the old "Bird Cage" wagon; The Ben Hur Chariot Race painted tab, another painted wagon with different types of Deer on the sides, together with many other animal dens, and last but not least the Famous Old Robinson Calliope. This old Circus Classic is now in Henry Ford's Museum - and in its day had travelled almost all the MAIN STREETS of America! It was usually played by "Deacon" Albright. Eight bulls were in the line-up along with a good display of other led stock.

A near panic was almost caused here when a storm, during the gathering of the matinee crowd, almost drove the elephants mad -- to say nothing of the roars of the cat animals. Watchful attendants however, were on the job. The sun came out, and a great performance, presented in three rings, was given.

Many "name" acts were on the show that season. Among them were such as 'Madam Bedini'; 'Hodginis'; 'Cecil Lowande'; 'Famous Ortons'; 'Nelson Family'; 'Rayduff Zouaves'; 'Shanghai Chinese Troup', and many others.

Always a welcome visitor - the John Robinson Circus made two more showings in Guelph. In 1923 and again in 1926 as a twenty-five car Show, of high quality, as before -- travelling on twelve flats, six stocks, six coaches and one ahead.

It is too bad that the well known names of old shows cannot come again  
(con't on page 4)



A VISIT TO THE BENSON WILD ANIMAL FARM

By Eddie Jackson C.H.S.

Tucked away in the picturesque hills of New Hampshire, within a stone's throw of Nashua, is located a veritable nature's paradise. To those familiar with it, it is called "The strangest farm on earth" and rightly so, for where in a day's travels, can one find such a varied collection of rare flowers, acres of green grass, trees laden with ripening fruit and one of the finest collections of wild beasts in America and all living, - mind you - in their natural environment. Such is Benson's Wild Animal Farm.

On a recent Sunday automobiles from twelve different states were represented in the 5000 capacity parking space.

As for wild animals, they are to be found in plenty and many undergoing a daily grooming for later appearances with circuses or zoos. If one's taste does not run to wild animals, there is a huge "happy family" pit that contains a Welsh pony, a Ceylon dwarf donkey, three goats, a sheep, small pig and five bear cubs that are the life of the party.

John T. Benson, sole owner of the farm was for twenty-five years American Representative for Carl Hagenbeck, Hamburg Germany wild animal dealer, but retired three years ago to devote his entire time to his animal farm in Nashua. Eddie Jackson, Charter member of C.H.S. is, this season, handling the Press for Mr. Benson, after spending forty years with the circuses, his last being Ringling Bros-Barnum & Bailey. Mabel Stark, winner of the Billboard bronze plaque that went to the greatest tiger trainer, is at the farm breaking a five tiger group and still retains her marvelous technique. Margaret Thompson, widow of Egypt Thompson, is training the chimpanzee group and Leslie Binks, ex-Mills horse trainer from Europe works the horses and ponies. Carl Neuffer, former Carl Hagenbeck employe is working wonders with the two baby elephants and Betsy, the farm elephant, who has been carrying New England kiddies for many years.

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JOHN ROBINSON'S CIRCUS

(Con't - Page 3)

with the Spring, and bring the time honored street parade back to this tired world of today. Their passing has marked an era in American History, which cannot be replaced.

The John Robinson calliope mentioned before, has been snapped by Don Smith in its present surroundings and is included in this issue.

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The CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY takes great pleasure in welcoming to our ranks, the following highly respected Fans and Historians of the Circus--

P.M. Silleyway,.....Lewistown, Montana...Gordon M. Potter, St. Joseph, Michigan.  
Dr. E.M. Olzendam..Manchester, New Hampshire....Walter Mathie, Long Beach, Cal.  
Jean Leroy, Detroit, Michigan....Charles Curtis, Los Angeles, Cal., etc. We are  
now preparing a complete membership list which will be sent to members at  
an early date. C H S has tripled its membership in less than one year !!!

Art Stensvad has relinquished his post as Director of Publicity, and we are  
pleased to announce that this work will be taken over by Mrs. Bette Leonard  
who will now edit our CHS column in THE BILLBOARD. We trust that in the  
future all members will be more generous with news of their activities. No  
column can continue unless there is a supply of material to be used in it.

Charlie Campbell's Route Card is a necessity for every active Circus Fan  
and we are indeed proud that a Charter Member of CHS has started this fine  
service, which certainly merits your support.

Don Smith photos of the Big Show are used in a two page spread, entitled  
"Lets Go To The Circus !" in the September issue of Chrysler Overseas Graphic  
Graphic. Included are Alfred Court, Lou Jacobs, Norma Humes, The Jungs, scenes  
at unloading and the midway, etc., credit being given to C H S .

6 postcard photos, Robinson parade  
1910, for \$1. Don Smith, Box 246,  
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Best Photos of Old Shows and Old  
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